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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 9718
INFO RUCNCOM/EC CARICOM COLLECTIVE
RUEHAO/AMCONSUL CURACAO 1175
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RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 1629
RUEHTC/AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE 1605
RHMFSS/CDR USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL
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RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
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UNCLAS PARAMARIBO 000529

SIPDIS

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SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR WHA/CAR - Jackie Rosholt, INR - Bob Carhart, INR - Ray Milefsky; COMMERCE FOR Michelle Brooks, OSD for Juan Cardenas

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: MARITIME BORDER DECISION: SURINAMERS, DISAPPOINTED BUT CALM, APPEAR TO ACCEPT RULING

¶11. (U) SUMMARY. The fate of the disputed maritime area off the borders of Suriname and Guyana was settled September 20 in a long-awaited and much-anticipated decision by the U.N. International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea (ITLOS). While GOS President Ronald Venetiaan expressed satisfaction and congratulated the Surinamese population on the outcome, opposition parties voiced disappointment with the Government for "giving part of the country to the Guyanese." In general, public sentiment appeared to express a mix of disappointment and acceptance. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND

¶12. (U) Over the past centuries, various unsuccessful attempts were made to settle the maritime border issue between Suriname and Guyana. In June 2000 the dispute escalated when a Surinamese gunboat blocked CGX Energy Inc, a Canadian company licensed by Guyana, from drilling oil in the "Eagle" block located in the disputed area. The two countries undertook diplomatic efforts to resolve the situation bilaterally and regionally through CARICOM, but to no avail. In February 2004, Guyana initiated arbitration proceedings against Suriname in accordance with the U.N. International Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

THE DECISION

¶13. (U) President of Suriname, Ronald Venetiaan, and President of Guyana, Bharat Jagdeo, simultaneously briefed their respective countries at 5:00 p.m. on September 20 on the ITLOS ruling. The U.N. ruled that it had jurisdiction in this matter and gave both Suriname and Guyana access to portions of an offshore basin which is believed to be rich in oil and gas deposits. However, the "Eagle" concession from which CGX was expelled in 2000 now falls entirely within Guyana's territory.

MIXED REACTIONS

¶14. (U) During the press conference, President Venetiaan seemed relaxed and in good spirits; he told the press that the Government

was "delighted and relieved that the dispute has been settled." Asked if he was satisfied with the outcome, Venetiaan remarked that "one cannot always get everything he wants, so you should not be greedy, and be satisfied with what you get." This remark did not sit well with the political opposition; immediately after the President's press conference, opposition members voiced their disappointment with the ruling and accused the government of "giving part of the country to the Guyanese." One opposition parliamentarian complained that all Suriname got from the ruling was "water and fish" -- whereas the Guyanese, presumably, would be rolling in oil. The press scolded Venetiaan for trying to "make fools of" the Surinamese populace by appearing to declare victory, and concentrated coverage on opposition objections.

¶15. (U) Marc Waaldijk, Director of the Suriname State Oil Company, had perhaps the most balanced reaction to the ruling. Waaldijk characterized the ITLOS' ruling as a "judgment of Solomon" and expressed disappointment, but said that Suriname now has the opportunity to expand exploration activities to areas which were previously disputed.

Comment

¶16. (SBU) Despite press frenzy and opposition rage, Waaldijk's comments probably typify the inward reactions of most Surinamers, who in general tend toward negativity and quiescence in political matters. Certainly, if it is possible for cynicism towards Venetiaan's government to mount any higher, it has. However, opposition calls for his resignation and hopes for popular protest are nothing but bluster -- this esoteric and distant-feeling decision is not the bump in the road that will upset Venetiaan's rickety, but surprisingly resilient, apple cart.